



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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ALEUTIAN CANADA GOOSE RECOVERING FROM NEAR EXTINCTION;
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES RECLASSIFICATION

The Aleutian Canada goose, a small goose facing extinction only 20 years ago and the subject of an intensive recovery program by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and cooperating agencies, has returned in numbers large enough to be proposed for reclassification from "endangered" to the less critical "threatened" status under the Endangered Species Act.

"The return of this resilient little goose could be the best wildlife news for Alaska this year," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director, John Turner. "It also is an outstanding example of how Federal, state, and private agencies can work together on behalf of endangered wildlife. Since the early 1960's, when the first goslings were removed from Buldir Island by Fish and Wildlife Service biologists, this partnership has worked successfully to bring the population from fewer than 800 to more than 6,000 today."

The Aleutian Canada goose, Branta canadensis leucopareia, is a white-cheeked goose that can be distinguished from most other subspecies by its small size, abrupt forehead, and a ring of white feathers at the base of the neck. In 1967, when the geese were placed on the endangered species list, the population was limited to its last known breeding area, Buldir Island, Alaska, near the western end of the Aleutian chain. Their wintering grounds were unknown.

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Service surveys now show that the subspecies population has increased more than 700 percent since 1975, and currently numbers over 6,000. It now nests on six islands within the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, including islands south of the Alaska Peninsula and in the Aleutian Island chain.

Through the late 1800's, Aleutian Canada geese were numerous throughout the Aleutian Islands. With the growth of fox farming in the early 1900's, commercial fox farmers brought Arctic foxes to most of the Aleutian Islands where they multiplied and subsequently could easily be trapped. The Aleutian Canada geese on these islands became easy prey for the foxes, which gradually eliminated all geese from the islands they shared.

The Service's program included removing foxes from islands identified as historically used by the geese. Biologists then began a long-term process of translocating limited numbers of the remaining geese from Buldir Island to other islands that had been made fox-free. Geese raised in captivity were also released on selected fox-free islands. Biologists placed markers on many of the geese in order to identify wintering areas for the geese in California, where hunting restrictions and habitat protection efforts greatly helped to reduce losses. Within the Alaska breeding grounds, the three-pronged recovery effort has focused on: (1) the elimination of Arctic foxes from former nesting islands, (2) the reestablishment of breeding populations on fox-free islands, and (3) surveys to determine and monitor new nesting populations.

Alaska, California, Oregon, and Washington all recognize the Aleutian Canada goose as endangered. These states have cooperated extensively in the recovery effort and have supported reclassification. California and Oregon recovery efforts have included the identification of key migration and wintering areas and the protection of the flock through hunter education and hunting regulations. Key staging and wintering habitats in California have also been protected through easements and inclusion within the National Wildlife Refuge System and the California State Wildlife Area and Park systems.

A recovery program will be continued until the species no longer is considered endangered or threatened. The Service will continue to remove introduced Arctic foxes from former nesting islands and to reintroduce wild geese to fox-free islands. At the same time, the Service will maintain hunting closures in key staging and wintering habitat, and monitor population trends and mortality from hunting, disease, and other factors.

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While it is too early to proclaim the recovery program a complete success, Turner says that if the reclassification is achieved and the goose moves from endangered to threatened status, it still will be protected fully by the Endangered Species Act. "However, it is well on the road to recovery and with continued support for the recovery program, this species could be delisted before the turn of the century," Turner noted.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 requires that species considered in peril of extinction be included on the U.S. List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants. "Endangered species" are those in danger of extinction. "Threatened" is a less critical category under the Endangered Species Act: "threatened with becoming endangered."

Since passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, less than a dozen reclassifications such as this have occurred. Changes in the status of a species from endangered to threatened due to recovery were made in 1984 for the Utah prairie dog and the Arctic peregrine falcon. Most of the remaining reclassifications took place following addition of the "threatened" category under the 1973 Act.

The proposal to reclassify the status of the Aleutian Canada goose was published in the Friday, September 29, Federal Register. Public comment on the proposal will be accepted through November 28, 1989. Comments should be sent to Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1011 E. Tudor Road, Anchorage, Alaska 99503.

A final decision will be published in about a year.